

CLCIV 375

Section 005

David Sullivan

Callum Holley

Response Paper 2

Alexander the Great was able to succeed where Hannibal Barca failed due to differing circumstances in their governments, their level of intelligence on enemies, and the differing strategies of their opponents.

To analyze why each general did what they did, it's important to understand the context of the power structures behind them. Alexander came from a monarchy, a system of absolute power that had been long entrenched in Macedonia. Its two most powerful institutions, the kingship and military dominated society, and in the first few chapters of *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch tells us how Alexander was supported by both. The Bucephalus story on page 4 climaxes with his father, King Philip, legitimizing his heir, claiming, "O my son, look thee out a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee." (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.4) while on page 6, the military hailed Alexander as king while still only a teenager (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.6). Already, his authority had little resistance; By the time Philip died, Alexander had full support in executing his conquests.

While a solid foundation was necessary, the true power of the kingship was complete autonomy over decisions. On page 10, Plutarch gives context for the battle of the Granicus, which begins with Alexander's generals expressing apprehension. He says, "And when Parmenio advised him [Alexander] not to attempt anything that day because it was late, he told him that he

should disgrace the Hellespont, should he fear the Granicus.” (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.10). Indeed, as king, Alexander could blatantly ignore the suggestions of his men, which on this occasion lets him initiate and win the battle. For tactically advanced minds, autonomy helps foster the best in them.

Hannibal on the other hand was not so lucky. The son of Hamilcar Barca, Hannibal was not born into royalty, but rather, to a general of the first Punic War. Indeed, the Carthaginian state did not operate like the Macedonian, but rather, Polybius describes it as an aristocratic republic like the oligarchy in Sparta. (Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius* 6.51) While able to claim power from the success of his father as well as his merit, Hannibal couldn't enjoy the same institutional advantages as Alexander. He didn't have unlimited power; Polybius demonstrates this at the battle of Zama, which Book 15, tells us was forced upon him by the Carthaginian senate. The Roman attack on Africa scared them into recalling Hannibal (Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius* 15.1), and it forced him to retreat from a campaign in Italy that he had largely done very well. Indeed, while Alexander had agency, Hannibal was beholden to the Carthaginian government; This yoke held Hannibal's genius back, which if given more power likely could have won the conflict.

Each general also had fundamentally different understandings of their enemies. Since his youth, Alexander grew up with a complex grasp of the Persian state. Plutarch relates how Persian Diplomats were impressed with the young king, “for he inquired of them the length of the ways, the nature of the road into inner Asia, the character of their king, how he carried himself to his enemies, and what forces he was able to bring, into the field.” (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.3) showing his genius at the time, but more importantly, giving him a concrete knowledge base to

build upon later. Indeed, Alexander knew not only had a tactical grasp of his opponents, such as “what forces he was able to bring, into the field”, but cultural norms and how their society operated. For example, to better control the people he conquered, “He first put on barbaric dress, perhaps with the view of making the work of civilizing them the easier, as nothing gains more upon men than a conformity to their fashions and customs.”. (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.30). Indeed, by utilizing the connection Persians made with clothing and power, Alexander demonstrates he had sufficient knowledge to maintain power over conquered.

While being tactically intelligent, Hannibal did not have this knowledge; he suffered greatly from assumptions that critically wounded his war effort. The most obvious example of this, ironically, occurs after his finest hour: The Battle of Cannae. According to Dr. Potter, “When you get right down to it, what you find out after Cannae is that Hannibal's entire strategic plan was based on a false assumption about the loyalty of cities generally in Italy to Rome.” (Potter, 15:45-15:56). Indeed, Hannibal rationalized that if he couldn't break the Roman spirit perhaps, he could separate their allies. He had won a long string of battles, so surely neighboring Italians would defect to Carthage. While trying to seduce Italy, Hannibal made treaties with Gallic nations to supplement his forces with “barbarian” auxiliaries (Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius* 2.34). While making tactical sense, he overlooked a crucial point of contention for the Italians: They had a long history of conflict with the Gauls. Wary Italians refused to join forces with the Gallic armies in their homeland, which Polybius affirms in Book 2, saying “From every side assistance was eagerly rendered [to Rome]; for the inhabitants of Italy, in their terror at the Gallic invasion, no longer thought of the matter as a question of alliance with Rome, or of the war as undertaken to support Roman supremacy, but each people

regarded it as a danger menacing themselves and their own city and territory.” (Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius* 2.23).

Indeed, while Alexander had both a cultural and tactical mastery of the Persians, Hannibal lacked sufficient cultural intelligence on Italy. Indeed, Hannibal’s ignorance of Italian hate for the Gauls burned his grand strategy, giving his enemies more allies and ultimately dooming his Italian campaign. This made him fail where Alexander succeeded.

Another hurdle that inhibited Hannibal was the engagement style of his enemies. Both Alexander and Hannibal were masters of the pitched battle, but while the Persians were eager to engage Alexander, the Romans were more reluctant.

Plutarch displays this with an interaction between a defected Macedonian and Persian King Darius on page 13. The Macedonian tries to convince Darius to not face Alexander head-on at Issus, but Darius refuses, citing his numerical advantage. (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* Pg.13) Unfortunately for Persia, this played perfectly into the hands of the more strategically adept Alexander, who won the battle. Even still, the Persians chose to engage him again at Gaugamela, where he once again claimed victory. Alexander was lucky in a sense as he came from a vulnerable position. His foreign conquest took him too far from any viable Greek supply line, and perhaps without direct contact, Alexander could have lost in an attritional conflict. Such a hypothetical plays out in the story of Hannibal, who like Alexander, was fighting in a foreign land cut off from Carthaginian supply lines.

Unlike Darius, Quintus Fabius Maximus, the Roman general responsible for handling Hannibal, knew he couldn’t beat Carthage in an open engagement. Polybius in book 2 recalls

that Fabius's chosen method was guerrilla war: harassing Hannibal in skirmishes, "But nothing would induce him to agree to give his enemy a set battle." (Polybius, *The Histories of Polybius* 2.90). Considering Hannibal already had supply issues, the "Fabian Strategy" of avoidance negated his tactical abilities, putting him at a disadvantage against outlasting Rome. Indeed, while Alexander was more successful due to the Persians playing into his strengths, Hannibal was less so due to the Romans pressing his weakness.

Considering both men were paradigms of strategic genius, it would be interesting to theorize how each would favor the other's situation. While making for a good debate, one must remember that history is contextual. Environment makes the man, and it's often circumstances that mold us into the people we are. In the circumstances of both generals, Alexander was able to garner more success than Hannibal due to his systemic advantage, more solid understanding of the Persians, and ability to engage them head-on.

Works Cited

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